

# The American Military and the Western Idea

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American military leaders have a wide array of responsibilities that, at times, may seem difficult to reconcile. They are expected to win wars, to secure America's place in the world arena, and to fulfill their moral responsibilities to their soldiers, fellow officers, and the American public. I am going to argue that the continued success of the United States and the continued global progress of the democratic way of life require that American military officers understand and strengthen the relationship between the three spheres of responsibility just mentioned. The unifying concept for all of this is something one might call "the Western idea."<sup>1</sup>

Consider first our war-fighting attitude. In August 1990, in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, President George Bush ordered the deployment of US troops to the Persian Gulf. At that time, he spoke of having the opportunity to form a New World Order, an order unmarred by aggression between nations. He spoke also of "a defining moment" in history. For the US armed forces, the Gulf War was truly a defining moment. We went to combat with weapons, doctrine, and personnel largely untried by war, and emerged victorious with our equipment, our doctrine, and the ability of our soldiers validated. But something else was validated—our war-fighting attitude—and we need to be clear about just what that was and is. One national columnist wrote approvingly, but without full understanding, of "a new tradition" in the American way of war: "Our warriors are kinder and gentler."<sup>2</sup> Others noted Bush's explicit invocation of just-war precepts to justify operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.<sup>3</sup> Still others (rightfully) lauded our pilots for taking more risks than the conventions of war required, flying lower and straighter on bombing runs to reduce civilian casualties to the absolute minimum.<sup>4</sup>

Our ground troops were praised for their highly discriminate use of firepower and for taking additional risks to give

Iraqi soldiers every chance to surrender without bloodshed, despite the provocation of the Iraqis' feigned surrenders at Khafji.<sup>5</sup> Our humane treatment of enemy prisoners of war also drew plaudits. Our targeteers and intelligence gatherers were as exacting and diligent as possible in their work, so that we knew where to bomb and shell to destroy enemy soldiers, equipment and facilities, but not civilians. But what if the battle had not gone well tactically or operationally? What if we had encountered resistance everywhere of the most savage kind, so savage that the battle for Kuwait hung in the balance? Would our soldiers and leaders have continued to fight with such scrupulous observance of the *jus in bello*? And should they, if it seems that a ruthless enemy is gaining the upper hand?

One school of thought, that of realism, argues that we need to be just as nasty in war as the enemy is. The realists contend that war is a Darwinian struggle for survival. The most vehement insist that it is ludicrous to attempt to interject notions of humaneness and mercy into such a struggle. The laws of war (say the realists) are simply artificial restraints that will, and should, be discarded under sufficient pressure on the battlefield. Indeed, the realists' credo is *inter arma silent leges* (in the war the laws are silent). There are still a number of nations, leaders, and armed forces that embrace realism in toto or in part. I want to argue against realism for two reasons.

First, such an argument will expose and clarify what is right about the current dominant war-fighting attitude in the US armed forces. And second, there are still those in American society, and even within the ranks of the armed forces, who do not fully understand why we followed the *jus in bello* so scrupulously in the recent conflict and, more important, why we should continue to do so whatever the enemy's conduct on future battlefields.

I will begin with an observation made by Michael Walzer in his book *Just and Unjust Wars*. The realist believes that the goals sought and the tactics used during hostilities require no moral justification. But Walzer points out that even the confirmed realist must still furnish a purely instrumental justification. He must show that there were no good strategies available other than the military strategy actually pursued and that his "harsh treatment" of the enemy soldiers or populace was a military necessity or, at least, was militarily expedient.<sup>6</sup> But there is an even stronger prudential argument against realism: namely, "harsh tactics"—violations of the *jus in bello*—are often tactically counterproductive.

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Consider this example: In May, 1945, the Muslim population of Sétif, Algeria, rioted, killing some 103 Europeans. General Duval, at the behest of the French *colon* government of Algeria, ruthlessly and indiscriminately punished the Muslim communities in and around Sétif, killing thousands, most of them innocent of any wrongdoing. After the massacres, while the *colons* were congratulating themselves on the success of the suppression, Duval told them in warning: “I have given you peace for [only] ten years.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the nascent Algerian liberation movement seized upon the barbarity of the French response and awakened a largely politically dormant population. “Sétif!” became a rallying cry, and the insurgency began to gain thousands of recruits. On 1 November 1954, almost exactly 10 years to the month after Duval’s prophetic warning, the Muslims began the Algerian War. Eight years later, after suffering 83,441 casualties, the French army withdrew in defeat from a newly independent Algeria.<sup>8</sup>

As a second example from recent history, consider our war in Vietnam. (And here I ask a rhetorical question perhaps best answered by those who fought in that conflict.) How often did our tactics in Vietnam—the sometimes indiscriminate use of massive firepower; the sometimes brutal treatment of enemy prisoners and “sympathizers”; the sometimes pervasive disrespect for the rights and dignity and desires of ordinary Vietnamese—strengthen the enemy cause and forces? One recurring lesson of history is that harsh tactics during hostilities, unless those tactics are literally genocidal, are far more likely to increase and prolong a conflict than to end it. Indeed, just war theorists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries such as Francisco Suarez, Francisco de Vitoria, and Hugo Grotius often relied upon prudential arguments in their advocacy of moderation and humanity in warfare.<sup>9</sup> We ought not fight in such a way that we sow such bitterness among a population that true victory—a lasting peace—becomes impossible.

Every army has a moral character. During World War II, the Russians fought with tremendous stubbornness against the Nazis because they knew what to expect from them: brutal treatment. The Kurds and Shiites fought hard against Saddam Hussein’s armies, and despite the current exodus, will undoubtedly fight hard in the future battlefields. Enemy soldiers facing US forces may well not fight hard because they know, after Grenada, Panama, Kuwait, and Iraq, what to expect from Americans—just treatment at all times; humane treatment whenever possible.<sup>10</sup>

It is not all that simple, of course. In war, especially in low-intensity conflict, the enemy sometimes deliberately uses an opponent’s respect for the *jus in bello* against him. He protects his combat assets by moving them into residential areas, as the Iraqis did during the recent Gulf War, relying on the allies’ demonstrated aversion to bombing civilian areas. The insurgent hides himself among the civilian population, as the Vietcong often did, deliberately blurring the combatant-noncombatant distinction, hoping either for immunity from attack or to provoke an indiscriminate

attack.<sup>11</sup> The latter would gain, for the Vietcong, recruits from among the embittered survivors; unfortunately, we sometimes obliged. But the long-term military advantage lies in scrupulous observance of the *jus in bello*.

We need to discipline our soldiers and ourselves to resist the occasional temptation to bend or break the rules of war in an attempt to gain some immediate tactical advantage. Our war-fighting attitude and conduct must be such that the enemy soldier trusts our sense of justice and humanity more than his own leaders’ or more than the worth of continuing to struggle against us. Of course, coupled with our reputation for respecting the *jus in bello*, we must maintain an equally deserved reputation for military prowess and devastating weaponry.

Walzer’s second argument against realism is a moral one. It rests on the contention that people, as ordinary, thinking, moral beings, simply demand moral justifications of military decisions and the resulting actions on the battlefield.<sup>12</sup> This, unfortunately, is not universally true. Authoritarian governments do not accept or condone moral protest from their people. Their “justifications” take the form of propaganda, repression of dissenting voices, censorship, and deliberate deceit. But it is fair to say that the people of libertarian, democratic societies such as ours require that their military act as “the moral arm and voice of the people.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the US armed forces violate the *jus in bello* on peril of damage to the national will to prosecute the war.

In the struggle to maintain the national will to win, our continued, collective perception of ourselves as a moral people is all-important. Further, worldwide telecommunications and ubiquitous and constant media coverage of armed conflicts mean that our actions on the battlefield will be tried before the court of world opinion. The propaganda of “the other side” will attempt to exploit any real or perceived violation by us of the *jus in bello* and to portray us as morally callous. Therefore, we must continue to build such a reputation for scrupulous battlefield conduct that the burden of proof for our supposed (or even real) lapses on the battlefield is always on the force or nation opposing us.

Consider this: We withdrew from Vietnam because the American people as a whole had lost the will to prosecute the war. There were many reasons for that loss of endorsement, but perhaps the most gnawing was the widespread belief that we had “lost the moral high ground,” that it was immoral for us to continue fighting as we were fighting. Despite innumerable actions fought by US soldiers as decently as guerrilla war allows, the images that haunted the collective American psyche and drove us to abandon the war were these: a Vietnamese ally, the Saigon chief of police, using a small pistol to execute a “Charlie”; a napalmed Vietnamese girl running naked down a tarmac road, her village burning in the background from a US air strike; and ditches filled with scores of bodies, clothes disheveled, faces contorted, women and children and old people—the inhabitants of My Lai, massacred by US soldiers. As an army, we lost faith in

the importance or the feasibility of winning “hearts and minds,” both Vietnamese and American.

I think that there is now widespread recognition within the leadership of the armed forces that we, in the military, must work hard to gain and maintain the nation’s support. We ought not do things on the battlefield that will alienate our soldiers and the war effort from the American people. Our current war-fighting attitude is the correct one, both for prudential and moral reasons. In the years ahead, especially in low-intensity conflicts, we must not allow ourselves or our soldiers to forget the importance of building a deserved reputation as hard, but honest, fighters.

Further, it is crucial that our war-fighting attitude continue to contribute to “the triumph of the Western idea,” and that is the responsibility I want to discuss next.<sup>14</sup> One author has described the essence of the Western idea as maintaining respect for “the moral equality and autonomy of individuals” while seeking to improve the material conditions for our existence; this is one doctrine by which society can hope to attain “meaningful, fulfilling lives for all.”<sup>15</sup> (Many other freedoms and commitments stem from those basic notions, of course, to include a commitment to a free-market economy.) In the summer of 1989, Francis Fukuyama published a seminal essay titled “The End of History” wherein he contends that liberal democracy—the Western idea—has won the ideological and material battle over all other political doctrines.<sup>16</sup>

After centuries of struggle and cataclysmic challenges from absolutism, fascism, and Marxism, “the Western idea” has won global endorsement as mankind’s end-state political philosophy. Many more years will pass, of course, before the remaining authoritarian states are swept away by the liberal, democratic spirit. In this regard, Fukuyama adds a sobering postscript. He warns that ethnic violence, nationalist sentiment, and economic hardship in liberalizing states may force “a return to traditional Marxism-Leninism as a rallying point. [Further] the fascist alternative is not yet played out.”<sup>17</sup>

Since Fukuyama issued his warning, other observers of the Soviet Union and former Eastern bloc nations have sounded increasing notes of alarm. The former Soviet Union, especially, is in danger; it is facing its worst crisis since the Great Patriotic War. Anatoly Sobchak, the mayor of St. Petersburg and a reformist politician, recently warned: “There is increasing skepticism about the very feasibility of a democratic choice. People are beginning to wish for a strong hand. Whose hand is not important, as long as it’s strong.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the still strong forces of Marxism, and the possibility of resurgent fascism, Islamic fundamentalism contributes to the bulwark of authoritarian states.

We, in the military forces of the democratic West, must do all that we can to continue to make libertarian democracy an attractive alternative to authoritarianism. Our armed forces, as an element of national power, should pursue a two-pronged approach to consummate the victory of the

Western idea. First, since the armed forces are among the most visible and characteristic institutions of the United States, they must continue to embody the Western idea. That means that our armed forces must continue to have, and to manifest, a commitment to racial, ethnic, religious, and gender equality. Our military forces must incorporate Americans from all societal layers and from all regions and walks of life—and every one a volunteer to fight for the Western idea. We must continue to confound our authoritarian adversaries with the very real example of a fully integrated, fully pluralistic armed force that seems to be, largely because of its democratic makeup, an unbeatable force. We must ensure that each of our soldiers, airmen, marines, and sailors understands that he or she must exemplify in his or her conduct, especially when serving abroad and on the battlefield, a commitment to the values constituting the Western idea.

Second, and here I echo an earlier point, we must train hard to win, and we must win our next battles. We must demonstrate our ability and resolve to defend the Western idea and, by our success, entice other peoples to embrace that idea as a way of life and of government. In this effort, we must commit financial and intellectual resources to create, develop, and arm ourselves with the best weapons and the finest technology on and above the planet. We must continue to show that individual initiative and creativity in a free-market economy make products, to include the engines and material of war, that are qualitatively superior to anything the captive citizens of controlled economies and authoritarian regimes can produce.

As a final related topic, consider the moral responsibilities of American military leaders. They have almost always recognized their responsibility to train our soldiers well in terms of teaching them tactical skills and preparing them for battle. We have understood the necessity for good leadership on the battlefield itself. But I want to discuss, now, our obligations to emphasize to our soldiers their ethical responsibilities on the battlefield. Perhaps the most important reason for this emphasis, the grounding of our obligation, is to promote the psychological and spiritual welfare of the soldier himself.

Two respected psychologists, one of them an Army officer who served in Vietnam, are among many who have observed that “for Vietnam-era veterans, delayed long-term [combat stress] effects appear to be higher than in previous wars.”<sup>19</sup> The psychologists cite, as possible reasons for the disparity, the fact that soldiers were rotated from Vietnam as individuals, not as units, and thus lacked “closeness and emotional support [from other unit members] during that long trip home while working through the traumatic combat episodes.”<sup>20</sup> Further, “the lack of a heartfelt ‘Welcome Home!’ from the American public also made the working through more difficult.”<sup>21</sup> The soldier returning from Vietnam learned that the war was being fought on “the home front,” and on that front, unlike Vietnam, the battle lines were clearly drawn. In Vietnam, the soldier could count on

the loyalty and support of his fellow soldiers; on the home front, he fought alone. The soldier learned that his sacrifices and sufferings were misunderstood, unappreciated, and even ridiculed by many Americans. This was a sustained psychological attack that could be every bit as intense and debilitating as that on the battlefield in Vietnam. In our military, one response, a general one, was simply to reject the judgment of our own society, a society whose morality seemed increasingly alien to us, and to “do what had to be done” to win the war in Vietnam. The Army, especially the professional Army, turned in on itself and away from American society. Consider this description of the French army in Algeria in the 1940s; change the identities and the year, and it might well describe the US Army of the 1960s.

[The] campaigns alienated the army from France. . . . The soldiers were perplexed when their hardships were ignored at home, annoyed when the purpose of their presence in Africa was questioned, and, ultimately, enraged when their methods of campaigning were condemned. . . . This feeling that it had been wronged and misrepresented forced the army in Africa to turn in on itself, to seek comfort in the fact that they were a band of brothers, professional military expatriates for whom France was increasingly a remote and incomprehensible land. . . . Among all but a few officers the feeling that disapproval in France was automatic removed any need to cater to metropolitan sensibilities.<sup>22</sup>

With the dangers of alienation fully in view, one of our moral responsibilities as military leaders is to nurture the support of our fellow citizens for the war effort. We do this best by fighting in a way that earns their moral approval. The war effort needs such approval, and just as important, our soldiers, for their mental well-being, need to fight and to return home in a climate of moral approval.

Second, all wars traumatize and brutalize individual soldiers to varying degrees. Many witness great brutality. Most suffer psychological stress, some even lasting psychological harm, from violence done to them or to their comrades. But many soldiers also suffer psychologically when they do things, even under orders, that they feel to be deeply wrong. Vietnam was the toughest kind of war to “fight cleanly.” Most of our soldiers and leaders did, but some, by accident, insufficient concern, or deliberate decision, did not. They did things in “the ‘Nam” that, unexpectedly, haunted them after they returned stateside—another reason, a philosophical one, for the fact that relatively high numbers of Vietnam veterans suffered, or are suffering, psychological distress. The language describing that reason is not clinical, but it is all too human: “a troubled conscience.”

As human beings, we cannot escape a constituting imperative “to live a life that would stand justified under moral and rational criticism.”<sup>23</sup> As thinking, moral beings of whatever intellectual ability or education level, we are driven to integrate all of our significant decisions and life actions into a consistent whole.<sup>24</sup> In most cases, a soldier who violates the *jus in bello* on the battlefield—kills indiscriminately, mistreats prisoners, executes hostages, or simply witnesses or condones violations—will suffer psychological and spiri-

tual doubt, disarray, and even trauma as he tries, successfully or not, to “put it all together,” to make moral meaning of his life. We owe it to our soldiers not to require them to do things on the battlefield that violate their conception of themselves as morally decent beings.

American soldiers fight for many reasons. They fight for the next hill, a town or city, an objective. They fight because their fellow soldiers are counting on them to fight. They fight because they are ordered to fight. But for most of our soldiers, what imbues all of those immediate motivations is an abiding faith that they are fighting for the libertarian, democratic way of life. Our soldiers, as Americans, fight best when they believe they are in a struggle to secure and protect human rights and freedoms. The laws of war are likewise motivated by the desire to secure just and humane treatment of individuals. There is no essential conflict between the moral principles embodied in the laws of war and the majority of the moral values of our society. Indeed, after a lengthy examination in a recent work, Col Anthony E. Hartle has concluded (rightfully I think) that the moral principles underlying the laws of armed conflict “appear to be *fully compatible* [my emphasis] with the moral values of American culture.”<sup>25</sup>

We cannot truly claim to be fighting to promote the fundamental moral values of the Western idea by violating the laws of war, laws which express many of those same values. We cannot be making the world safe for the innocent by deliberately or indiscriminately killing the innocent. Our soldiers recognize this basic contradiction. If we force them into moral contradiction on the battlefield, we destroy their sense of self-worth and their belief that they are fighting justly in a just cause. Gen Norman Schwarzkopf recently explained this crucial point, using a simple yet deeply persuasive metaphor. When asked by a reporter why the US forces in the Persian Gulf would continue to adhere to the *jus in bello* even if the Iraqis did not, Schwarzkopf offered as explanation this metaphor, one drawn from our frontier past. It touches deep roots in the American psyche: “Guys in black hats are allowed to shoot people in the back, hide behind rocks, all that sort of stuff. Guys in white hats don’t do that.”<sup>26</sup>

It is not a matter of convention; it is a matter of moral identity. American soldiers are “guys in white hats.” They are not “hired guns.” It is true that the American military is constrained in that it must do the bidding of political masters or leave the service. The politicians define the politico-geographical boundaries within which the military must work. The politicians limit the scope and the scale of the conflict. But American military officers are fully responsible for the *jus in bello*. It is they who decide how American soldiers are trained, how they will fight, and how they will employ our powerful weapons. In that regard, our training must continue to incorporate a habitual respect for, and adherence to, the laws of war. Our operations orders and plans must make comprehensive provisions for the treatment of prisoners of war, the safeguarding of civilians, and the reporting and prosecution of war crimes. The verbal instruc-

tions of commanders must stress the fact that we will, in all cases, fight in a morally decent manner. We must continue to expand formal instruction in the laws of war. We must also add instruction at all levels on the importance of winning “hearts and minds,” both at home and abroad, before, during, and after future battles.

We are at a defining moment in history. There is a real possibility of establishing a New World Order, one which will grow progressively more just, more democratic, and more humane with passing years. Perhaps the most significant contribution of American military leaders at this great ideological juncture in mankind’s history is to ensure that the US armed forces continue to promote the Western idea.

We have made a great deal of progress in the ideological and material battle against authoritarianism. More and more of the peoples of the world are embracing libertarian democracy as the path to a better life. If our political and military leaders wisely adhere to and promote the Western idea, they may well bring about an unprecedented era of global peace and freedom.

## Notes

1. This essay is a slightly revised version of the essay that won the 1991 Douglas MacArthur Military Leadership Writing Competition at the Command and General Staff Officers Course, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I want to thank Maj Melissa Patrick and Maj Jeffery Long for recommending several revisions.
2. Martin Anderson, “Gulf War was a First for U. S. Military,” *Los Angeles Times*; reprinted in the *Kansas City Star*, 14 April 1991, 1–2.
3. See for example, Kenneth T. Walsh, “Bush’s ‘Just War’ Doctrine,” *U. S. News & World Report*, 4 February 1991, 52–53.
4. See for example, Paul Weingarten, “Chaos of War is Guided by Rules,” *Chicago Tribune*; reprinted in the *Kansas City Star*, 17 February 1991, J-1.
5. Stories of the feigned surrenders of 29 January 1991 at Khafji were widely carried on the Cable News Network and the print media in the week after the battle.
6. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 8–9, 240–41.
7. Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 28.
8. *Ibid.*, 538.
9. See for example, Hugo Grotius, “De Jure Belli Ac Pacis Libri Tres,” 1625; rpt., *Hugo Grotius on the Law of War and Peace*, trans. Francis W. Kelsey, ed. James Brown Scott (New York: Oceana Publications, 1964), vol. 2, bk. 3, chap. 12. See also Francisco de Vitoria, *De Indis et de Iure*

*Belli Relectiones*, 1557; rpt. trans. John Pawley Bates, ed. Ernest Nys (New York: Oceana Publications, 1964).

10. In the wake of Desert Storm, there has been some criticism of the supposedly unnecessary or wanton “battles of annihilation” waged by allied forces against retreating or greatly debilitated Iraqi ground units in Kuwait and Iraq. (Others have argued that the destruction of the Iraqi forces ended too soon.) I think it is too soon to debate the issue conclusively because we do not yet have all of the facts. What is clear at this stage is that units that continued to resist or to attempt to break out from pending encirclement were fired upon, in accordance with the rules of war. This was just conduct. Allied units made extraordinary efforts to encourage Iraqi soldiers to surrender and gave good treatment to those who did. This was humane conduct.

11. For an excellent examination of the tremendous tactical and categorical difficulties of separating combatant from noncombatant in a rural low-intensity conflict (such as Vietnam), see Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1972).

12. Walzer, 9–10.

13. Dr. E. Maynard Adams, Department of Philosophy, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, coined this phrase. He first brought my attention to this notion in 1985.

14. Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” in *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, 3.

15. E. Maynard Adams, *Mind, Value, and Culture: Essays in Honor of E. M. Adams*, ed. David Weissbord (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview Publishing, 1989), 359. See also E. Maynard Adams, “The Cultural and Social Viability of the Idea of America in the Next Century,” in *The Idea of America* (Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing, 1977), 195–223.

16. Fukuyama, 14.

17. *Ibid.*, 17.

18. Anatoly Sobchak, cited by Michael Dobbs, “Soviet Crusader against Communism,” *The Washington Post*, reprinted in the *Kansas City Star*, 7 April 1991, K-5.

19. Edna J. Hunter and Col Howard T. Prince II, “Focus on Combat Stress,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, August, 1988, 58–64, reprinted in *Fundamentals of Senior-Level Leadership in Peace and War* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: US Army Command and General Staff College, 1990), 71.

20. *Ibid.*, 71.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Douglas Porch, “Bugeaud, Gallieni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 382.

23. E. Maynard Adams, “The Accountability of Religious Discourse,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 18 (1985): 7.

24. *Ibid.*, 6–8.

25. Anthony E. Hartle, *Moral Issues in Military Decision Making* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 71–78, 95–97.

26. Cited by Weingarten, J-1.